

Reimagining Our Communities in a Just Recovery

Context

The COVID-19 Pandemic had a disproportionate impact on marginalized and vulnerable people. As we plan a recovery, York region organizations have been imagining new models that address these vulnerabilities to make us more resilient in the face of the next wave or the next pandemic.

Yvonne Kelly (Social Planning Council of York Region) and Kate Greavette (York Region Food Network) hosted a wide-ranging discussion on the issues that could shape that reimagined approach.

Here is a summary of the meeting held on Monday, June 22, 2020, which will be used as the basis for community meetings on each of these topics as we work to build a resilient community for all of us.

Issues

Housing:

Affordable housing is critical to a resilient recovery. But right now our housing system is not working. The public sector and nonprofit sector, however, can help to solve that problem. Municipalities and the province can dedicate their land to affordable housing. The Federal government can focus investment on sharply increasing the supply of affordable housing. They can all partner with the non-profit sector to create housing that is affordable and stays affordable in perpetuity. And we keep affordable housing in place by establishing stronger rent controls and improved eviction prevention programs.

Therefore: We ask that all levels of government reserve public lands for affordable housing, and increase investment in the nonprofit sector to build permanently affordable housing. We ask the Province of Ontario to restore full rent controls and continue the policies now in place preventing evictions.

Income Supports:

With the CERB we recognized the need for income supports to be at least at the poverty line, but for years social assistance rates have remained at half that level. Individuals on social assistance receive less than \$10,000 a year in Ontario in a patchwork of inadequate and inaccessible programs. Federal supports weren't accessible to all Ontarians and were clawed back or barred for the lowest income residents. A universal income is an option, but it's benefits will be lost if it displaces adequate social services or decent wages. Income supports should improve the circumstances of people living on low incomes.

Therefore: We ask that the federal government work with the Province of Ontario to establish income supports that raise incomes to at least \$2,000 a month for all people living on low incomes.

Decent Work:

A resilient recovery will depend on a healthy consumer market, which relies on good jobs and livable incomes. We learned from the pandemic that many more workers are essential to livable communities, and they deserved the benefit of hazard pay. We learned that people also need benefits like paid sick leave, so they can stay home when they are sick or have to look after family members. We learned that our labour market has problems that undermine safety, like promoting part-time, precarious work so people have to spread themselves across multiple jobs to make a living. And we know that in the future,

more people will work from home, but we have no policies or rules to make sure that this work is safe and appropriate. We need to ensure safety with new employment standards that support essential workers, provide adequate wages, and deliver reasonable benefits and employee protections. And we need to build our economy by creating good jobs through programs like community benefit agreements.

Therefore: We ask the Province of Ontario to improve the employment standards act and raise minimum wages to ensure people are safe wherever they work and have livable incomes. We ask that all levels of government build community benefits agreements into public projects to help to create decent work and reignite the economy.

Food Security:

During the pandemic we witnessed the immediate impact on individuals and families experiencing a loss of income and/or the inability to access groceries that they needed – the result was increasing rates of food insecurity among already vulnerable populations in addition to many who had not experienced it before. The charitable food sector is working overtime to provide food access to community members, yet this is an inadequate and unsustainable response. Even when increased attempts are made, the charitable food sector remains unable to adequately meet the nutritional and cultural food needs and preferences of all community members. Food security should provide for choice, agency and accessibility therefore individuals require the income necessary to purchase their own food.

Therefore: As food security is directly linked to income security, all levels of government should act to ensure stable full time jobs with livable incomes and adequate income supports of \$2,000/month for those who are not employed.

Community and Nonprofit Services:

During the pandemic we saw critical systems like childcare, transportation, and eldercare collapse, revealing how fragile and poorly supported those services are. But we also saw how partnerships between governments and the nonprofit sector can help tackle tough challenges like food security and seniors care. These services will depend on a continued partnership, and more stable funding from all levels of government to be genuinely stable, accessible and affordable.

Therefore: We ask that all levels of government continue to actively collaborate with the nonprofit sector and provide the stable long term funding needed so they can provide accessible, affordable, quality services for the whole community. We also ask that essential public services like childcare, transit and eldercare, remain in the public realm where quality is not compromised by the pursuit of profits.

Next Steps

We will be hosting meetings on each of the topics that will allow us to flesh out policy directions to address each of these issues. We recognize that all of these issues are interconnected and that future advocacy should ensure a framework of interventions that coherently address vulnerable communities in a just recovery.

In the steps to follow, leaders and community members in York Region will reach out to policy makers to encourage them to make these changes.

People interested in supporting this effort can join in by emailing socialplanningcouncilyr@gmail.com